

Pastor We Need To Talk!

Chapter 11

Just for the Pastor "It's never too soon to speak up!"

The late evangelist and popular pastors' conference speaker, Dr. Vance Havner, used to say, "It's too late to talk about draining the swamp when you're up to your neck in crocodiles." When should a pastor speak up when he detects conflict personally or within the congregation?

It has been said that churches have the biggest rug in town under which they sweep their problems. "Church secrets" can be detrimental to a congregation and pastor.

Congregations, like small towns, want to protect their image. They often believe, like individuals, that if they have problems, people will think they aren't committed to the Lord. A congregation is a family, and like any family it will have periods of conflict. But what do many congregations do? They keep silent! As the leader of the congregation, a pastor may also keep silent to help preserve unity in the congregation. If he would speak up even before the conflict is noticeable, he might help himself and the congregation to avoid conflict.

LaRue's, survey of ministers across the country gives us insight into times when a pastor should "speak up." LaRue says, "In retrospect, almost half of ousted pastors (those terminated or pressured to resign) think they could have done something to avoid being forced out. Resolving conflict was the primary action they wished they had taken sooner." LaRue gives two suggestions for pastors to resolve conflict. (1), "Resolve conflict as soon as possible; (2), bring in an outside professional." Concerning using outside help, LaRue says, "Nearly 9 out of 10 churches using this method (outside professional) found it to be very helpful 49% to somewhat helpful 38% in easing tensions."

According to LaRue's survey, pastors who have been terminated or forced-out "wished they had researched key topics more carefully when candidating."

Results of LaRue's survey notes that

45% wished they had explored former conflicts in the church.

43% wished they had explored the church's expectations of them.

30% wished they had discussed the Board's vision for the church.

25% wished they had explored their predecessor's reason for leaving.

18% wished they had known about the level of lay involvement.

11% wished they had explored the church's finances before they had taken this particular church as pastor.

LaRue continues, "With a third of all churches having forced out the previous pastor and a tenth of all churches being repeat-offenders (having a history of three or more forced exits), pastors searching for a new church need to enter their next pastorate

carefully." In other words, pastors need to speak up before they go to a particular church as pastor or as a staff person.

The survey also reveals, the following information about "Forced-Out pastors:

82% wished they had talked to members of the congregation.

79% wished they had talked about Board Members.

68% wished they had talked with former pastors.

66% wished they had talked with their denominational leader.

4% wished they had spoken to other local pastors concerning conflict.

Therefore it is obvious that pastors need to speak up, before they are called to a church, and they need to continue to speak up after they become pastors. LaRue encourages ministers to talk to the right people. He says, "Knowing the right questions to ask, however, doesn't make a difference if you don't go to the people with the answers. Four out of five 82% wish they had gone straight to the members of the congregation. About the same 79% wish they had been more forthright with the members of the church board." ¹

Here are a few suggestions to aid pastors in speaking up before it's too late.

1. When you have a "gut sense" that something isn't right—in the planning stages of a project or in the early stages of discussing some issue, speak up. Say to the individual or group, "I have some concerns I would like to voice, and I would like to see if others are having similar concerns."

2. It may not be appropriate to confront someone publicly, but if you are aware of inconsistencies, immorality, rudeness and abusive behavior that might be damaging to the congregation, then meet with the individual by appointment as soon as possible and voice your concerns and observations. If the person appears overly emotional, stressed-out or possibly harmful, be cautious and take someone with you to talk to this person. Remember, "speak the truth in love." If you are wrong in your observations, apologize and move on. Better safe than sorry.

3. If there seems to be a lot of chattering about other topics and a lack of interest in discussing the topic at hand, say to the group, "It appears to me that we may be losing the focus of this meeting. Does anyone else sense that?" If so, help the meeting to get back on track by exploring the commitment level in the group by asking each group member to share how they feel about the topic or issues that are being discussed in the present meeting.

4. If you are unhappy with what you hear during negotiations with a prospective church, speak up. Don't wait until you are called as a staff person and then begin to complain.

5. If you are criticized, agree only with that which is true concerning you; don't volunteer to be crucified for all the problems in the church. Say to the person or group, "You're right, I do need to improve in that area. Can you give me some suggestions?"

6. When you see lay persons or other church leaders pushing a personal agenda, say to the person or group, "Maybe we need to pray and gather more information before making a decision on this issue. Who would be willing to meet with before this issue is brought to the church body?" This buys time for research and discussion. The church's business meeting is not the place to say, "I see a potential problem here." But, if you do not have prior knowledge, it's better to speak up then than after the decision is made.

7. If a fellow church member is being criticized or personally abused in a meeting or a parking lot session, say, "I'm feeling very uncomfortable about what we're discussing. Since this person isn't here, we can't be certain that what we are sharing is 100% true. Our conversation may get back to this person, so let's be careful and fair in what we say. I'm sure we wouldn't want to damage a reputation. Let's try to be affirming and supportive of this church member." (You are trying to be a role model and a peacemaker and teaching others indirectly how conflict often begins - with unaccountable conversation and incorrect rumors.)

8. Pastor, when you feel uncomfortable, sense something is wrong, and/or feel led of God to say something, then speak up! Remember what Havner said, "It's too late to talk about draining the swamp when you're already up to your neck in crocodiles."

9. Keep the congregation informed from the pulpit and by meetings, newsletters, and in

general conversation about where you want to lead the congregation. And with all due respect, they may not be ready for your proposal. By getting feedback from the congregation you have a chance to talk with them and hear their concerns before a conflict begins over your proposal.

10. Constantly build relationships and create a climate of openness with your congregation and especially with your church leaders. If you teach people how to share openly, and you exhibit a role model of openness and non-judgmental sharing during the good times, your people will be more willing to hear you when conflict arises.

Tips on how to build relationships with your congregation that will help bring peace to your ministry and lessen conflict.

1. Love your people, laugh with them and enjoy being in their company. It's the people, not the job!

2. Remember Jesus' teaching:

"YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'"This is the great and foremost commandment. "the second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,' (Mt.22:37-39).

"... pray for those who persecute you." (Mt.5:44)

3. Remember the Apostle Paul's advice:

"... encourage one another, and build up one another..." (I Thess.5:11)

"... Live in peace with one another," (I Thess.5:13)

"... help the weak, be patient with all men." (I Thess.5:14)

"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others,"
(Phil.2:3-4).

"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.... Never take your own revenge...

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, " (Rom.12:17,19, 21).

4. Don't be distant from your people, cold, snobbish, rude or arrogant, but humble.
5. It's the minister's responsibility to teach the people about your responsibilities as pastor and person. Be open and honest. Don't live a secret life. Gently slip down from your pedestal and teach them you are a human being with the feelings, desires, temptations and frustrations that they have. This will shock some people, so be gentle, patient and persistent in loving and teaching.
6. Admit you are wrong and have sinned when it happens. Ask for forgiveness and move on (I John 1:9).
7. Very Important: Model for your people how to be dissatisfied, upset and even very angry about an issue without "blowing up" and hurting other people and without pouting. Introduce them to the Christ who cleansed the temple and teach them about

anger and conflict.

8. Learn to manage your anger. If you need counseling in this area, then get help now!

Apologize when you lose your temper. Control your temper at home also. If you're angry at the church, don't abuse your family.

9. Don't ignore conflict. Work through the conflict and learn from it. A good question to ask after resolving conflict is, "What have we learned here and how will we handle this issue the next time?"

10. Learn your style of Conflict Management. Dr. Louis McBurney, a psychiatrist who has devoted his career to counseling ministers and missionaries in crisis, established the Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, where pastors, missionaries, church staff members, and other church professionals can seek new directions and new beginnings. He was interviewed in *Leadership Journal* (Spring Quarter, 1980). The article/interview was *entitled "A Psychiatrist Looks At Troubled Pastors."* McBurney says, "In trying to resolve conflict we usually take easy ways out." McBurney mentions four ways that pastors often use - that don't work. McBurney is referring to the pastor and spouse, but these easy ways out are also used by pastors in relation to congregations.

1. Avoidance

McBurney says, "Running from it, pouting about it, and pretending it's not really happening seem initially more inviting than actually facing the conflict."

2. Intimidation:

"If avoidance doesn't work, we try intimidation," says McBurney. "We threaten, cry, create power blocks, and quote Scripture."

3. Manipulation:

"Sometimes we can't successfully intimidate, so we manipulate. This involves enticement, bribery, and withholding intimacy and personal influence."

4. Deflection:

McBurney says, "Our final solution is usually deflection. Instead of focusing on the real issue, we deflect to issues that are safer, more urgent, and more comfortable." ²

11. Work to find a win/win solution to your problems.

12. Assume your church family loves you and minister to them as if they do love you.

13. Join or begin a pastor's support group with healthy minded pastors. In such an objective group you can test your ideas and role play how to deal with people you find difficult to communicate with.

14. Invest in counseling from time to time. A confidential professional listener is worth the time and money.

15. Invest in Clinical Pastoral Education. This training is priceless and will challenge you to discover abilities and patterns of behaviors that can help you grow personally and professionally. (For information contact the Pastoral Care Department or the Chaplain's office at your local hospital).

16. Don't lose your sense of humor. Laugh at yourself and learn from your mistakes. You will be a healthier person and minister. Your people will love you for it.